

NOVEL

乃木
若葉は
勇者で
ある

SILENT
WORLD

著:ごお イラスト:空中船影

アウトロー・
ワンダー
ランド-0-

著:田中ロミオ
キャラクター原案:藤崎
satomi
挿絵:大庭ケンジ

企画原案・シリーズ構成:

タカヒロ(みなどそふと)

執筆:朱白あおい

イラスト:BUNBUN

監修:Project 2H

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著：田中ロミオ
キャラクター原案・脚説：saitom
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SILENTWORLD

著：ごか
イラスト：空中始影

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CENSORED

I was shaking and couldn't move.

Perhaps somewhere in my mind, I thought

that a battle couldn't happen.

But still, they came.

The battle has begun.

The heroes were given weapons.

Exclusive weapons imbued with the power of the gods, the heroes' battle outfits,

and...

A "trump card" for fighting especially strong enemies.

But it would [REDACTED]

the [REDACTED]

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Planning and configuration by Takahiro
Writing by Akashiro Aoi
Illustration by BUNBUN
Vertex Design by D.K&J.W WORKS
Supervision by Project 2H

企画原案・シリーズ構成/
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乃木若葉は
勇者である



The first ones to notice the Vertexes were launching an attack on Shikoku was the armed fleet staffed by former Self-defence Forces personnel that had the outside of the Seto Inland Sea "wall" under 24-hour surveillance.

Grotesque creatures were gathering at the wall in droves.

The armed fleet fired everything they had in an all-out bombardment to protect Shikoku.

However-- the modern weapons said to be the culmination of the blood and knowledge of countless men were unable to even scratch the Vertexes.

The armed fleet was forced to retreat, and chased down to the wall.

A group of Vertexes then slipped through the barrier wall, invading Shikoku.

The fleet chased down the invading Vertexes, but--

Having sensed the enemy invasion, the Shinju had already activated forestization within Shikoku.

As Wakaba peeked around the forestized Shikoku, she activated her smart-phone's hero-exclusive app.

Her body was enveloped in light and the clothes she was wearing transformed--

They became her heroes' battle outfit. An outfit imbued with the Shinju's power, remarkably boosting the physical ability of those who wore it. Further enveloping one's body in the power of the gods made one's attacks effective against Vertexes even without an exclusive weapon.

The counter-Vertex organization known as the Taisha (Grand Shrine) had researched the Shinju's power and discovered a scientific and magic method of utilizing it. The outfit was a result of that research. It was the culmination of the Shinju's blessing and the knowledge of mankind.

The battle outfits varied from hero to hero, but Wakaba's was characterized by the contrast of clean blue and white, reminiscent of a kikyou.

Once transformed, Wakaba stuck her sword into the ground and stared intensely at the Seto Inland Sea.

-"Wakaba-chaaaan!"

When Wakaba turned towards that voice, she saw Yuuna and Chikage running towards her. Yuuna had tekkou (hand and wrist guards) while Chikage had a scythe like a death god's. Just as Wakaba had a sword, those two had those as their weapons.

-"Haah, haah... Time suddenly stopped, and then all around, these huge vine like things popped out of nowhere, like, gwaahh! It really shocked me! I'm so glad I was able to figure out where everyone was thanks to the map...!"

Yuuna tried to catch her breath as she pointed out the map on her smart-phone screen to Wakaba. The locations of the heroes and the Vertexes were each indicated on the map by a coloured dot.

-"Wait, Wakaba-chan, you've already transformed!?"

Yuuna looked surprised as if she had only just now noticed.

-"Be ready for the battlefield at all times. I always carry my sword so I can fight whenever necessary."



- "It's really like you to be so serious and responsible like that, huh Wakaba... I gotta learn from your example!"

Yuuna clenched her fist and looked at Wakaba with a genuine look of admiration.

- "Takashima-san... I think you're fine the way you are..."

Chikage muttered as if she were speaking to herself before looking around and frowning.

- "But still... this is forestization, huh..."

The land of Shikoku in its entirety had become covered in the same plant structures that composed the wall.

When forestization happens, all time inside of Shikoku stops. All living and non-living things get covered and assimilated into the vegetation. The few things that remain in their original form are the Marugame Castle, the Seto Ohashi Bridge, electrical towers, high-rise buildings and other such large-scale structures.

Living things assimilated into the Jukai will receive no damage from Vertex attacks. And heroes are the only ones who retain their original form and can move during forestization.

(I did hear information about forestization before, but--)

As Wakaba looked around at the sight of the transformed Shikoku, a stern expression formed on her face.

It was too unreal a transfiguration.

It was almost like a spirit world.

Yuuna touched one of the vines growing nearby.

- "I've never seen such a huge plant. This is the Shinju-sama's doing too, isn't it...?"

- "Yeah. Forestization is an emergency protective measure made by the Shinju."

It is said that the protective wall and barrier around Shikoku are still incomplete.

In the event that Vertexes group together and invade Shikoku, the Shinju makes a bold move to weaken part of the barrier, allowing them to pass in. The Shinju does this because the constant strengthening of the barrier to protect against Vertex invasions would end up wasting spiritual power.

If the Shinju were to exhaust its power, then the people in Shikoku would lose the ability to live. While Shikoku was a closed world, it was able to remain self-sufficient in energy and materials thanks to the blessing of the Shinju's spiritual power.

Therefore, it was the heroes' role to repulse the Vertexes that had gotten into Shikoku.
And while the Vertexes were invading, the Shinju utilized forestization to protect the people--

(But the defence of forestization isn't perfect...)

Wakaba mentally whispered to herself as if to raise her conviction.

If part of the Jukai were to get damaged by an attack, then that damage would be fed back into the real world in the form of a natural disaster or an incident of unknown origin.



In short, the longer forestization went on, the more it would consume the Shinju's power.

Therefore, they had to annihilate the Vertexes as quickly as they could and end forestization.

- "Hey! Guys!"

Tamako came running with a shout. She was dragging Anzu along by the hand behind her.

- "Sorry we're late!"

Tamako had a circular disk with sharp blades attached to it-- a bladed yo-yo [旋刃盤, Senjinban, called a "Spinner" in Dynasty Warriors].

Anzu had a weapon resembling a rapid-fire crossbow.

- "That's everyone, huh. ... Guess this is our first battle. Let us take down the accursed Vertexes with our own hands."

Wakaba addressed the four other heroes on her team.

They would make those bastards pay for suffering they caused humanity.

- "That's fine and all, but... naturally that means you'll be the one leading the charge... against those monsters, right? I mean, you are the leader..."

Chikage spoke quietly as she threw Wakaba a glance that seemed to be testing her.

The atmosphere between them clouded over in gloom.

- "It's not an issue of who leads the charge. Let's just all fight together, right? Isn't that what teamwork's all about?"

The one who butted in with an exasperated tone was Tamako.

- "Teamwork..."

Chikage muttered as if chewing on that word before looking at Anzu.

Anzu's body trembled. She looked pale.

She was afraid--

- "Iyojima-san... Can you fight?"

- "..."

Anzu hung her head and gave no answer. She couldn't answer.

- "Doi-san, you two were late in getting here... Was it because Iyojima-san felt too afraid to move out...? And you guys talk about teamwork... You have no room to talk..."

At Chikage's words, Anzu shut her eyes tightly and clenched her fists. But even so, the fear that caused her to tremble would not fade away.

- "And that's to say nothing of..."

- "Koori-san, you've said too much."

Wakaba interrupted Chikage and glared at her sharply. Chikage merely looked away in disinterest.

(Koori-san did say too much... but Iyojima's current state certainly isn't looking good.)

Wakaba looked at Anzu.

- "Iyojima. I understand why you'd be afraid, but unless we fight, humanity is at risk of destruction. Chin up."

- "I-I'm sorry..."

Tears formed in Anzu's eyes.

- "Wakaba, that's enough, isn't it?"

Tamako stood between Wakaba and Anzu as if to protect the latter girl.

Seeing those three like that made Chikage squint her eyes at them cynically.

- "It's the duty of a commander to raise their troop's morale... Nogi-san... Could this situation be the result... of your lack of a leader's disposition...?"

- "...!"

Those words struck a nerve with Wakaba. Wakaba herself wasn't confident that she was the appropriate choice for the role of leader.

The atmosphere engulfing the heroes became thicker and thicker. It was Yuuna who spoke up as if to blow away that atmosphere.

- "Guys, I know it's important that we're all getting along, but let's leave the talking for later!"

- ""Getting along???"

Wakaba, Anzu, and Chikage's voices overlapped as they looked at Yuuna.

- "Yup. They say it takes good friends to argue with each other, don't they?"

- ""No, that's wrong."""

All three of them gave Yuuna the same retort at the same time.

- "All three of you denied me without a second thought!"

Yuuna was in shock.

- "Umm, uh, Yuuna-san... I think that's wrong too."

- "You too, Anzu-chan!?"

That was the final blow.

- "Uuugh..."



Despite taking the damage from everyone giving her the same retort, Yuuna pulled herself together and spoke resolutely.

-"~But anyway, the Vertexes are the cause behind your argument, and they'll be right there real soon. They're your real enemy."

Wakaba gasped at Yuuna's words.

(... She's right. Finding fault among ourselves and getting frustrated will just distract us from the real problem. We should focus our frustration on the bastards who brought us this situation in the first place.)

Tamako and Chikage awkwardly looked each other in the face.

-"Well, that is true."

"It's just as Takashima-san said... right?"

Anzu was still afraid, but--

(It doesn't matter. If Iyojima can't fight, then I'll just fight enough to make up for her. That's what it means to be a leader.)

Wakaba felt the weight of her sword in her hands as she made up her mind.

-"Okay, then guess it's time for Tama and everyone else to get pumped up!"

The other four girls besides Wakaba took out their cell phones and tapped the app.

-"We'll all be heroes who get along!"

As if Yuuna's shout were the signal, the clothes the four of them wore each began to transform.

Yuuna's battle outfit was pink, reminiscent of a yamazakura--

Chikage's battle outfit was red, reminiscent of a higanbana--

Tamako's battle outfit was orange, reminiscent of a himeyuri--

But Anzu alone did not transform. The power wielded by a hero was largely affected by their mental state. Without a firm will and the preparedness to fight, the hero's battle outfit could not be worn.

-"..."

Chikage looked on silently at Anzu, who was unable to transform.

-"... I-I'm sorry... I..."

As tears formed in Anzu's eyes, Tamako patted her on the shoulder in encouragement.

-"Don't sweat it! Tama and the others will take 'em all down."

-"... okay..."

Anzu nodded sadly.



Wakaba used her smart-phone map to confirm the Vertexes numbers and movement.

Around 50 had invaded the barrier. The Vertexes were headed straight for them. The Vertexes' characteristic movement pattern was essentially that they started by targeting humans. In the forestized Shikoku, the only humans were Wakaba and the other heroes. Therefore, the Vertexes headed straight for them.

At the limit of Wakaba's sight, she saw the group of Vertexes in the distance. Their distance was approximately 3 km... 2 km...

-"Koori-san. I'm sorry for saying such impertinent things earlier. I should let my actions speak rather than my words, shouldn't I?"

Wakaba said that to Chikage before leaping into the air, sword in hand. She negated an entire kilometre's distance in a single bound, closing in on the enemy forces.

-"Rrrroooohhhh!!"

With a flash of her sword's white blade as it left its sheath, Wakaba split the Vertex at the head of the group cleanly in two. Before the bisected Vertex vanished, Wakaba used its remains as a springboard to leap into the air once more. She sliced another of the monsters down the middle.

Wakaba's current level of iaigiri far outstripped the level she was at three years ago in sharpness, speed, and efficiency. It was the result of her physical growth, the battle outfit she received from the Shinju, and her hard practice all intertwined.

As she cut down the endless swarm of Vertexes, Wakaba shouted as if to have her voice reach all of Shikoku.

-"Heroes!! Follow me!!"

Wakaba, a single knight, leaped into the enemy masses, slaughtering Vertex after Vertex.

As she watched those deeds from behind, Tamako couldn't stop the words from leaking out of her lips.

-"Man, that Wakaba's... pretty damn cool..."

But Tamako became irritated at her own words. She thought "What the hell am I doing watching her in admiration? Am I gonna let her do everything herself?"

-"Well, I'm gonna go start too!"

Following after Wakaba, Yuuna leapt towards the Vertexes as well.

Tamako gave a glance to the still-fearful Tamako and told her

-"Stay right here, Anzu. We'll go beat them all and come back, okay?!"
before flying off.



- "Haah!"

As she took a deep breath and exhaled, Yuuna's fists punched into a Vertex's body with the speed of the wind and the weight of solid rock.

Yuuna's exclusive weapons were tekkou. All of the weapons held by the heroes were either artefacts dedicated at shrines, or things otherwise modified from such artefacts. And they were all imbued with spiritual power derived from the gods of the land of various places.

Vertexes gathered around Yuuna, surrounding her. But she still remained calm.

For the past three years, Yuuna had been thoroughly trained even further in striking martial arts so that she could effectively use her weapons. Karate. Kempo. Boxing...

- "Teyaaahhh!"

Yuuna's fist struck a gigantic Vertex's body.

One step behind Yuuna, Tamako approached the group of Vertexes as well.

- "Leave this one for Tama!"

Tamako's weapon was a bladed yo-yo. Unlike Wakaba's sword and Yuuna's fists, it had the advantage of being able to attack enemies from a certain distance.

Tamako swung her arm in a wide arch. Her yo-yo spun its blade into a Vertex, tearing it apart. Tamako then pulled the wire to bring it back to her hands.

- "Easy!"

In Tamako's eyes, defeating the Vertexes also meant protecting Anzu.

Her birthplace was near Anzu's, and even in the Vertexes' initial invasion three years ago, Tamako had fought while protecting Anzu.

- "I'll beat them all and not let a single one get anywhere near Anzu!"

She threw her bladed yo-yo once more, slaughtering a Vertex.

But-- at that time, Tamako's wasn't necessarily 100% vigilant.

After all, she had won against a Vertex three years ago, and now with her bladed yo-yo, she was beating enemy after enemy.

Now that she was actually fighting the Vertexes, she couldn't help but think somehow that they were no match for her.

She soon learned what a simple mistake that was.

If Tamako threw her bladed yo-yo far, it would take time for it to come back. During that time, she had no means of opposing the Vertexes.

The enemy could not let such an opportunity pass. The Vertexes used the gap between Tamako's bladed yo-yo throws to surround her.

- "...gh"

She tried to escape, but the Vertexes blocked her path of retreat.

There was some distance between her and both Yuuna and Wakaba. She couldn't expect either of them to be able to save her.

- "No way..."

Her composure took a complete nosedive, and she could feel death thrust before her throat.

A Vertex drew in on Tamako voraciously.

- "... This can't be happening. Not this easily..."

Would she die?

Though she was a hero, one wrong step could spell death for her.

After all, this was a battlefield.

- "Dammit...!"

Tamako shut her eyes--

But her life did not end there.

When she reopened her eyes, there were countless golden arrows piercing into the Vertex's body.

The fatally wounded white monster began to vanish.

- "Tamacchi-senpai..."

When she turned towards the voice, she saw Anzu with her crossbow at the ready. She was clad in a white battle outfit reminiscent of a stock flower.

- "Anzu... that outfit..."

- "... was able to transform. When I thought that you were in trouble, Tamacchi-senpai, when I thought I needed to save you, the app activated..."

There were still some tears in Anzu's eyes. But she was no longer shaking.

Tamako grabbed the bladed yo-yo that finally returned and gave Anzu an unyielding smile.

- "Thanks! Tama's gonna stay in front, so cover for me, okay, Anzu?!"

- "Yeah!"



Anzu nodded and readied her crossbow. A weapon with even more specialized at ranged attacks than Tamako's bladed yo-yo.

While the rest of the heroes were struggling against the Vertex horde-- there was just one who remained in the rear without acting.

Koori Chikage.

She was not merely watching disinterestedly.

She paralyzed with fear.

She was able to transform.

She had a weapon that could oppose the enemy. And yet she didn't move.

Just like with Anzu, this was Chikage's first fight with the Vertexes as well. Vertexes had not appeared in the area she was in when she awoke as a hero three years ago.

- "Ugh... ugh..."

She was tormented by impatience, frustration, and feelings of alienation.

She had thought that Anzu was more afraid than she was, yet Anzu had just charged into the battlefield.

Chikage was the oldest, yet she was losing even to Anzu who was the youngest.

Chikage had really only found fault with Anzu as a knee-jerk reaction to her own fears.

- "Gun-chan!"

At that moment, she saw Yuuna running towards her.

- "Takashima... san?"

One Yuuna had stopped in front of her, Chikage was able to tell see scratches here and there on her body. Most likely wounds she had incurred from fighting the Vertexes. And yet Yuuna was less concerned about herself, and more concerned with Chikage who hadn't participated in the battle at all.

- "Are you okay, Gun-chan?"

- "I... I'm... sorry... for being too scared to fight... How could I have said all those things to Iyojima-san... when I can't even fight myself...?"

Yuuna held her hand out to Chikage with a reassuring smile.

- "Don't make that face. I'm right beside you."

- "Takashima... san..."

Chikage took Yuuna's hand.

- "Let's go. Hold on tight!"

Chikage leapt with Yuuna with and let her lead the way.



Chikage was bewildered at her inhuman ability to jump hundreds of meters in a single bound.

(This... is the hero's power...)

As she sped through the air with nothing to support her, Yuuna's hand in hers was all she could truly believe in.

One Vertex headed towards the two of them.

-"Watch, Gun-chan--"

Yuuna clenched her free hand into a solid fist.

-"-- We can fight. Humans won't lose to the likes of them!"

Wielded by human will, the fist of divine power pulverized the Vertex that came after them in a single blow.

But immediately afterward, another Vertex approached them.

-"Gun-chan, believe in your own power. I know you can do it!"

Chikage looked at the scythe she held.

(If Takashima-san's by my side... then I can fight.)

Chikage swung her scythe. The fact that Chikage could swing the human-height weapon with her slender arm was in itself proof of divine power. The giant blade she swung cleaved the Vertex in two right before her eyes.

-"I... I did it..."

She couldn't believe her own strength. But the physical feedback she felt from cutting the enemy was unmistakably real.

-"Wow! That's the spirit!"

Yuuna's words of praise made Chikage happy more than anything.

Three more Vertices approached from the front.

-"Gun-chan, onto the next ones!"

-"Yeah....!"

Yuuna and Chikage let go of each other's hands. Yuuna took out the left Vertex with a single punch. Meanwhile, Chikage eliminated the other two Vertices with one swing of her scythe.

After defeating her third Vertex, Chikage was now confident of her own power.

(... I'm... stronger than the Vertices...)

She was no longer afraid of the enemy. In fact, her fear had turned into rage.

(I can't believe... I was afraid of these things...!)

-"Watch, Gun-chan."



Chikage gasped and looked where Yuuna was pointing. There, she could see Wakaba fighting the Vertexes. Compared to Tamako and Anzu, and Yuuna and Chikage, who were each teaming up to fight the Vertexes two on one, Wakaba was rushing the deepest into the Vertex horde and taking on the most enemies at once.

Each time she unsheathed her sword in iaigiri, another Vertex was cut and vanished. The intensity of Wakaba's fighting was extraordinary even from the perspective of Chikage and the other heroes who were already far more powerful than human beings.

- "I think it's thanks to Wakaba-chan leading the charge like this and attracting the attention of all the enemies that the rest of us can fight like this. Wakaba-chan really is amazing. So Gun-chan... do you think you mind acknowledging her abilities too?"

- "..."

Chikage gave no answer.

Seeing Wakaba fighting on the front lines made Chikage feel just a little bit bitter.

By the time they had cut down a fifth of the enemy's numbers, the Vertexes' movements began to change. Several individual Vertexes gathered into one place.

They began to "evolve".

The same thing had happened in the Vertexes' initial raid three years ago.

When a formidable enemy appears, several Vertexes fuse, giving birth to a single, stronger Vertex. Three years ago, Wakaba was unable to cross swords with such a fused Vertex.

And now.

The Vertexes began fusing into a cylindrical shape.

Tamako and Anzu looked at the fusing Vertexes from a distance.

- "What is that...?"

Tamako tilted her head.

They had heard about evolved Vertexes formed from fusion in lectures, but they had never actually seen one in real life. No evolved Vertexes appeared among the ones they fought three years ago.

Evolved Vertexes were said to have power incomparable to those of the ordinary ones. However, the cylindrical shaped Vertex didn't look strong at all. It even lacked the teeth that its original form possessed.

- "First, I'll...!"

Anzu aimed her crossbow at the Vertex of unknown nature. When she pulled the trigger, the crossbow shot out arrows that traced golden arcs through the air as they chased after the enemy.

The next moment, the cylindrical Vertex began forming a clear red plate-shaped structure.

- "!"



Anzu's arrows struck the plate-shaped structure and reversed in trajectory. The arrows imbued with divine power were now coming back at their original owner, Anzu.

- "Oh no!"

Tamako transformed her bladed yo-yo into a large shield and struck down the arrows heading towards Anzu.

They would have mortally wounded Anzu had they hit.

- "Th-thank you, Tamacchi-senpai."

- "Now we're even. ... Anyway, I guess that thing's some kind of reflective plate, huh..."

If the plate was able to reflect Anzu's arrows back with such accuracy, then throwing Tamako's bladed yo-yo at it would probably yield the same results. Projectiles weren't very effective here. Should Tamako directly attack it with her bladed yo-yo's blades at close range? But would blades be effective against an opponent that was immune to arrows--?

As Tamako pondered, one girl thrust at the enemy with a single fist.

It was Takashima Yuuna.



- "Hero puuuuunch!!"

Yuuna struck the evolved Vertex's reflective plate with her fist.

But her fists that had pulverized normal Vertexes in one blow didn't even scratch this enemy.

- "If one hit won't work... then I just gotta keep hitting it ten, a hundred, a thousand times more!"

Yuuna mustered all of her willpower. All to use the trump card they had worked out for fighting fierce evolved Vertexes.

The hero's existence is connected to the Shinju. All things on the surface are stored within the Shinju as conceptual records. One can access those records, extract them, and cause their power to manifest in one's own body--

Out of the infinite records available to her, the one Yuuna now chose was "Ichimokuren". The fairy embodying wind and storms.

Ichimokuren bestowed Yuuna's fist with the power and might of a tornado.

Her hero outfit transformed as well.

- "One Thousand... Consecutive Hero Puuunches!"

When tornadoes intensify, they can keep spewing winds for dozens of minutes intense enough to destroy steel-reinforced concrete structures. Their might is said to match those of nuclear weapons.

Yuuna's incessantly pounded her fist that had gained the power of a tornado into the plate-shaped structure. Once she had surpassed 800 punches, a crack ran through the plate, and after 900 punches, the crack had spread throughout the entirety of the plate. By the thousandth punch, the evolved Vertex had been smashed into pieces.

Wakaba held her own against the other normal Vertexes as she watched Yuuna's fight.

The hero's "trump card" carried a huge burden on the body.

Therefore, the Taisha had told them to use it as little as possible. Wakaba had intended to be the one to use it when the time necessitated it.

- "... Dammit, Yuuna..."

Wakaba thought to herself--

These past three years, the Vertexes had set their sights on Nagano as their target for invasion, and as a result, Shikoku lived in peace. In that short time allotted to them, Wakaba and the others had persisted in anti-Vertex training. The hero battle outfits were created. They had worked out offensive measures that utilized the power of the Shinju.

(Shiratori-san, citizens of Nagano... It's thanks to you that our power got through to the Vertexes. The result of today's battle is all thanks to you.)

As Wakaba took a moment of silence to meditate, a Vertex attacked her.

Her reaction came a moment late--



crunch *tear*!

- "... Gross. That's not very palatable."

The one who took the hit wasn't Wakaba, but the Vertex instead.

Wakaba had dodged the Vertex's charge with the least necessary movement, and at the same time, she bit off part of the enemy's body with her teeth.

She swallowed down the Vertex meat and cleaved the enemy in two.

Upon seeing Wakaba take a bite out of the Vertex, Tamako and Anzu's faces stiffened.

- "Tama's gonna try not to piss off Wakaba anymore..."

- "Y-yeah... I think that'd be for the best."

- "Wakaba-chan! You can't go eating weird things like that, okay?!"

After all the Vertexes had been swept away and the battle was over,

After forestization had ended and Marugame Castle had returned to its original sight,

Wakaba was forced to sit in the proper Seiza position within the castle walls. Hinata was scolding her.

- "But..."

- "No buts!"

- "But they ate my friends in the past. So I wanted to give them some payback... You know, a reward for everything, and all..."

- "What if it gave you an upset stomach?!"

- "Ugh... mm..."

Wakaba had nothing to say in reply.

Yuuna, Tamako, Anzu, and Chikage watched on from the sidelines.

- "Wakaba-san was fiercer than a demon, but now she's..."

When Anzu said that in a small voice, Tamako folded her arms and muttered "hmm".

- "So Hinata was the scariest..."



That night--

News of how the Vertexes invaded and were defeated by the heroes spread throughout Shikoku.

The people cheered in relief and joy at the victory.

At the same time, the communication records between Shikoku and Nagano were announced.

The truth that there were other people outside the wall who were also desperately resisting the Vertexes brought the power of hope to Shikoku's residents.

However, they could not tell them that communication with Nagano had ceased.

Wakaba and the others alone would know of the despair that befell Nagano.

Wakaba watched the news reports on TV as she ate soba alone.

- "... Shiratori-san, I still think that udon's better than soba. Soba's just... a little too salty for me."

Even after the battle, the lives of Wakaba and the others continued unchanged.

During lunch break the next day, while everyone was eating together, Tamako spoke up.

- "Hey, Wakaba. We've all been talking."

- "About what?"

Suspicion rose on Wakaba's face.

- "We think you really are the best choice for leader. The Taisha's always been saying you should be the leader, but after that battle, I can clearly see why."

- "... What's this all of a sudden?"

- "Well, you see, in that last battle... It was because of you leading the charge that Tama and everyone else was able to fight. If it weren't for you... We'd all be heavily injured... or maybe even dead."

After the battle had ended, Wakaba had single-handedly taken down two thirds of the Vertexes. If it weren't for her hard fighting, Anzu and Chikage would possibly have been in danger.

Anzu also leaned forward and joined in on what Tamako was saying.

- "I think it's best you're leader too, Wakaba-san!"

- "Yeah, yeah. You really do seem the most like a leader too, Wakaba-chan."

Yuuna smiled wholeheartedly.

- "... I don't object. Your efforts certainly did play a major role. ...And Takashima-san says you have the qualities of a leader too, after all."

Chikage mumbled without looking at Wakaba.

- "..."



Wakaba looked everyone in the eye--

-"... Thank you."

Before that point, she hadn't felt the conviction that it was okay for her to be leader.

But-- she decided to believe in the words of her friends.

-"Isn't that great, Wakaba-chan?"

Hinata looked at Wakaba with a smile.

-"By the way... Now that that's settled. Wakaba. There's something I've wanted to say to you."

Tamako looked at Wakaba with scornful eyes.

-"W-h-y do you call Tama by her last name? You call Yuuna 'Yuuna', don't you?"

-"Welp, that's cause I told her to call my by my first name earlier!"

Yuuna cheerfully answered Tamako's question.

When Wakaba first met Yuuna, she had called her "Takashima". And in response, she said "It'd be easier if you called me Yuuna!"

-"Mmm... In that case, call me 'Tamako', or if you want to be more familiar, you can call me 'Tamacchi' too."

Tamako spoke with a pout.

-"Actually, Tamacchi-senpai's been really bothered about why you don't call her by her first name, Wakaba-san."

-"What!? N-n-n-no I haven't! I haven't been bothered one bit!"

Tamako angrily denied Anzu's teasing words.

-"Oh, also, please call me by my first name too."

-"Anzu! You're just riding on what Tama said for your own advantage, aren't you!"

As she watched Tamako and Anzu's little exchange, Chikage murmured.

-"... I'm... I'm fine being called by my first name too."

-""!?"

Wakaba, Tamako, and Anzu each looked at Chikage in surprise.

-"What...? What's with those looks...?"

-"No, it's just, you said something a little unexpected, so..."



When Wakaba said that, Chikage looked the other way in annoyance. Her cheeks were slightly pink.

-"If everyone else is getting called by their first names... it'd be weird... if only I got called by my last name.

Also, I'd like you to quit it with the honorific speech... It's stuffy."

Wakaba nodded once she heard those words.

-"Okay, then from now on, I'll do that. Chikage, Tamako, Anzu."

--Was that what they called a promise?

Wakaba felt her heart growing warm.

-"Okay, then let's take a commemorative group photo!"

And with a smile on her whole face, Hinata took out her smart-phone.

-"Today marks the day of the Shikoku heroes' fresh start, as well as the day Wakaba-chan took up her new post as leader. ...Teehee. That's one more photo for my secret Wakaba-chan photo collection."

-"Hinata! You're still collecting photos for that?! One day I'll erase it for sure, okay!"

-"A secret photo collection? What's that?"

-"Sounds like fun! Hina-chan, let me see it too!"

-"Tamako, Yuuna! Don't show interest in it!"

-"I want to see it too!"

-" ... Whatever..."

Hinata captured everyone's excitement in the cafeteria that day in a picture.

(Chapter 3 End)

